

# The State Journal

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## Opinion

### ACROSS THE STATE

## *The least they can do*

#### **The Kentucky Post**

"Upon initial review of the Senate's actions, we have renewed hope that we will conclude this session with a budget, and that is a very good thing." So said Gov. Ernie Fletcher in a statement released this week after the upper chamber passed its version of a 2006-08 budget bill.

We share the sentiment, though our joy is not unbridled. Passing a budget is a constitutional mandate in Kentucky, as it is in Ohio. While it is the most important duty of the Legislature, it is also the minimum expected of it. For Kentuckians to be cheered at the prospect of their elected representatives doing what they're supposed to do is a dismal commentary, one reflecting the fact that in 2002 and 2004 the General Assembly ended its regular session without passing a budget.

In their broad outlines, the Senate and House versions of the budget are similar — and consonant with the one that Fletcher put forth to start the process. All three call for spending just under \$18 billion over the next two years. All three feature a substantial pay hike for teachers. All three would, for the second session in a row, commit the commonwealth to relatively high levels of borrowing to fund construction projects.

As might be expected, the spending plan approved by the Republican-con-

trolled Senate is closer to that of the Republican governor than the one passed by the Democrat-held House. ...

While we appreciate the need to restrain borrowing (Fletcher sought \$930 million, the House \$1.8 billion, the Senate a more realistic \$1.4 billion) there's no reason for anyone to be shy about competing for northern Kentucky projects within a reasonable debt cap. The \$69.5 million earmarked in the Senate plan for northern Kentucky is significantly less than the set-asides for Lexington (\$80 million for a biological/pharmaceutical complex at the University of Kentucky, for example, along with \$17.5 million to bolster research at UK and \$36.5 million for improvements to the Kentucky Horse Park in preparation for the 2010 World Equestrian Games) and Louisville (\$70 million for a health sciences research center at the University of Louisville, \$75 million for a downtown arena along with major help on construction of two bridges over the Ohio River).

The legislative session will end on April 11. That doesn't leave much time.

Given recent history, we approach the conference committee crunch time with modest hopes: that legislative leaders see fit to do their jobs and reach an agreement on a budget — one that is legitimately balanced and includes full funding for the key northern Kentucky projects.